

EFFECTS OF THE APPEARANCE AND BODY TYPE OF MODELS USED IN
ADVERTISING IMAGES ON THE SELF-ESTEEM OF CONSUMERS – COMPARISON
BETWEEN MALES AND FEMALES

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International Business
Bachelor's Thesis
Supervisor: Kristie Collins
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Objectives

The main objectives of this study were to explore ways in which the body type and appearance of models portrayed in advertising images affect the self-esteem of young adult consumers, to compare the explored effects between males and females, and, based on the results of the study, to provide businesses with recommendations on which kinds of models should be chosen to be featured in advertisements for the attitude of consumers towards the brand to be as favorable as possible.

Summary

Media, such as advertising, is believed to have significant impact on the self-perceptions of consumers by displaying images of idealized and unrealistic models. This, especially if the impact is negative, may not be a favorable situation for businesses, either. This study focused on exploring effects that advertising images featuring models with either idealized or average appearance have on the self-esteem of young adult consumers. Two focus groups were conducted in order to compare these effects between two genders, males and females. In addition, recommendations to businesses are provided.

Conclusions

The findings of this study seem to indicate that exposure to neither an idealized nor an ordinary-looking advertising model has significant impact on the self-esteem of an individual. The results suggest that no significant effects were explored, because the participants were not able to relate to the models in the displayed advertising images. However, some positive impact on the self-esteem of male participants could be explored. When it comes to recommendations to businesses, relatable models seem to be favored by females, whereas attractive models were perceived as more preferable by males.

Key words: *advertising, consumers, consumer behaviour*

Language: English

Grade:

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

As a consequence of technological and other major changes in our society, media, including advertising, has become an integral part of our daily lives. Consciously or not, we are influenced by the constant flow of advertising images. Kilbourne (1999: 64), citing Jhally (1998), illustrates the phenomenon as follows: "To not be influenced by advertising would be to live outside of culture. No human being lives outside of culture."

Thompson et al. (1999), cited in Groesz et al. (2002: 12) claim that mass media promotes a standard of beauty that often makes consumers have negative thoughts about their body if they do not possess the attributes associated with the standard. The models used in advertising images contribute particularly strongly to the thoughts and feelings that advertising evokes in us consumers, because we are so prone to compare ourselves with them. The purpose of this thesis is to find ways in which advertising utilizing images of different types of models affects us more deeply than just on the level of our daily buying decisions.

1.2. Research Problem

It has been proved by many scholars that the appearance of models used in advertising images has an impact on consumers in several ways. One of the most significant ways is the effect on the self-esteem of consumers. Consumers tend to make comparisons to models they see in advertisements in terms of appearance, body size and fitness. Because models used in advertising images generally present the body ideals influencing the society at that time, these comparisons often result in effects such as developing a more negative body image, which, in turn, may lead to lower self-esteem of the individual. This may not be a favourable outcome for businesses, either, as critiques may blame businesses for unethical behaviour. Thus, researching the topic is significant both from the point of view of consumers and businesses.

1.3. Research Questions

The research questions that this thesis aims to address are as follows:

1. What new insights can be explored on the ways in which the appearance and body type of a model displayed in an advertising image affect the self-esteem of young adult consumers?
2. What differences between males and females can be observed regarding the types of effects?
3. Based on the results of the research, what implications could there be for businesses to improve their advertising?

1.4. Research Objectives

The research objectives of this thesis are:

1. To explore how the self-esteem of an individual is affected by an advertisement featuring a model with either ideal or average appearance.
2. To contribute to the research already done on the topic by observing differences between males and females regarding these effects.
3. To provide businesses with recommendations on which kinds of models they should use in their advertising for the attitude of consumers towards the brand to be as favorable as possible.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

The appearance of models used in advertising has attracted a lot of attention as a research topic among scholars. A possible explanation for this extensive attention could be that the way an advertising model is portrayed has impact on individuals in several ways. One of the most significant ways is the effect on the self-esteem of consumers (Crouch & Degelman, 1998; Groesz et al., 2002). According to Festinger

(1954), individuals have a tendency to compare themselves to other human beings. This comparison process is suggested to take place also in a situation where an individual is exposed to pictures of advertising models (Richins, 1991; Martin & Gentry, 1997). Consequently, as images of advertising models tend to be idealized (Goffman, 1979; Acevedo et al., 2010; Keh et al., 2016), the comparison process often leads to negative outcomes, such as lower self-esteem of the individual (Peck & Loken, 2004; Sobol & Darke, 2014).

In addition to examining the effects that exposure to images of advertising models has on the self-esteem of consumers, this literature review aims at comparing females and males with regard to this phenomenon.

Firstly, the roles of media and culture as contributors to the phenomenon described above are discussed. Secondly, this literature review provides an overview of the depiction of the two genders in advertising images, analyzing the meanings that these depictions transmit. Thirdly, the concept of self-esteem is defined and analyzed. After this, the social comparison process is discussed, followed by an examination of different coping strategies and a discussion on different outcomes that may be resulted by the comparison process.

2.2. The Role of Media and Culture

To explain why the appearance of advertising models has such a strong influence on consumers, it is first essential to consider the role of media, and particularly, the role of advertising, in Western society. Several scholars have suggested that advertising indeed has a pervasive role in our society (Martin & Kennedy, 1993; Acevedo et al., 2010). Pollay (1986: 18) describes the phenomenon in the following way:

The proliferation and the intrusion of various media into the everyday lives of the citizenry make advertising environmental in nature, persistently encountered, and involuntarily experienced by the entire population.

In addition, Kilbourne (1999) concludes that it is impossible in the modern society for anyone to avoid exposure to advertising and not to be influenced by it. Thus, it is ensured by the ubiquity of advertising media that everyone is, if not influenced by it, at least exposed to it.

Both Pollay (1986) and Kilbourne (1999) note that advertising has a significant role in shaping the values and attitudes that prevail in a society. Thus, advertising also shapes, at least partly, our body and appearance ideals.

Grabe et al. (2008) state that media is full of depictions of overly-thin female bodies that are impossible for most women to achieve. In fact, bodies depicted in media are much thinner than real women on average (Fouts & Burggraf, 2000). Then again, depictions of unnaturally fit and muscular male bodies are also common in advertising (Weeden & Sabini, 2005). Groesz et al. (2002: 12) cite Thompson et al. (1999) when arguing that by promoting these kinds of images, mass media establish a certain standard of beauty and acceptable appearance for the genders. Various researchers highlight the role of print media, particularly fashion magazines, in promoting the ideal body type (Harrison and Cantor, 1997; Tiggemann, 2003). However, some critics have questioned whether the unrealistic portrayals of bodies in media establish appearance ideals, or whether the media only gives consumers what they want to see (Silverstein et al., 1986, cited in Agliata & Tantleff-Dunn, 2004: 10).

Many scholars believe that socio-cultural factors are the main reason why bodies are depicted in media the way they are. For example, Kang (1997) emphasizes the significance of contemporary culture in affecting the formation of these ideals in advertising. According to Martin and Gentry (1997), cultural norms are the reason behind the expectation to adhere to the appearance ideal. Other researchers highlight that it is the emphasis on achievement that prevails in Western society that drives people to compare themselves to the appearance of others to such a great extent (Wood, 1989).

2.3. Depiction of Genders in Advertising

Goffman (1979) addressed in his book *Gender Advertisements* comprehensively the portrayal of males and females in print advertisements. Goffman concluded that advertising tends to portray the genders in an ideal, exaggerated way. The author developed six categories which describe the ways in which portrayals of males and females differ from each other. The categories are: 1) Relative Size, 2) The Feminine Touch, 3) Function Ranking, 4) The Family, 5) The Ritualization of Subordination, and 6) Licensed Withdrawal (Goffman, 1979). Although Goffman created these categories several decades ago, many researchers in recent years have based their work on these categories (Acevedo et al., 2010; Mager & Helgeson, 2011). Later on, Kang (1997) added two more categories to complete the ones created by Goffman; Body display and Independence/Self-assertiveness.

It appears that women have been researched more than men when it comes to their depiction in advertising images. However, Agliata and Tantleff-Dunn (2004) propose that the attention that has long been on the appearance of women is now increasingly shifting towards men, too.

2.3.1. Depiction of Females

Advertising has been blamed for depicting females in a stereotyped way (Kang, 1997). For example, it has been claimed that women are often portrayed in a simplified manner as being sex objects, housewives, and dependent on men (Courtney & Lockeretz, 1971; Kang, 1997). Mager and Helgeson (2011) compared their findings to those of Courtney and Lockeretz (1971) and found that in the 2010s, women were still pictured to be dependent on males' protection, but it was no longer true that advertising depicts women as housewives and incapable of making significant decisions. However, Mager and Helgeson (2011) found that portrayal of women as sex objects had become even more common than before.

Goffman (1979) identified some characteristics related to some of his six categories that appear particularly often in portrayals of women. Goffman suggested that women, as opposed to men, are often depicted using 'the feminine touch' (Goffman, 1979), that is, touching objects softly or caressing the surface of an object. What is more, according to Goffman (1979), self-touching is more common in female models compared to male models. Thus, according to these findings, women are pictured in advertising as soft and sensitive, perhaps even fragile. The emphasis on thinness in depiction of females (Wan et al., 2013), which can also be interpreted as portrayal of fragility of women, indicates that Goffman's (1979) findings are still relevant.

What is more, it is claimed that in advertising, women are depicted as being subordinate to men. Goffman (1979) proposes that men are portrayed in executive roles more often than women. It should be noted, however, that Goffman's study was conducted in 1979, thus almost four decades ago. Nevertheless, the situation does not seem to have changed significantly. According to a more recent study by Mager and Helgeson (2011), advertising seems to suggest that women are no worse than men in their job, but men continue to have a dominant position in the work environment.

Mager and Helgeson (2011) note, however, that there appears to be a trend toward more balanced role portrayal of the two genders in advertising, and the range of different roles in which women are portrayed is growing. In contrast, Acevedo et al. (2010) found in their content analysis that of the advertisements analyzed from years 1991-2008, not a single one pictured a woman in a high-income level position. Acevedo et al. (2010) argue that advertising portrayals do not reflect the changes in society concerning women's roles, but rather stick to the old stereotypes.

Regarding the ideal body type for women, as already stated, the main theme that emerges is thinness (Striegel-Moore et al., 1986, cited in Grover et al., 2003: 125; Fouts & Burggraf, 2000). According to Weeden and Sabini (2005), in the most attractive female body, waist-to-hip ratio (WHR) as well as body mass index (BMI) are at the lower end of the typical distributions. This indicates that thinness, indeed, is a desired characteristic for women.

However, even though thinness is often emphasized as an ideal body type for women, there are other ideals that have emerged more recently. Overstreet et al. (2010) suggest that in addition to wanting to be thin, more and more women now strive to achieve a curvaceous body. Harrison (2003), cited in Overstreet et al. (2010: 92) describes a curvaceous body as a body with “a medium bust size paired with a thin waist.”

Overall, the importance of physical perfection is highly emphasized for women (Acevedo et al., 2010).

2.3.2. Depiction of Males

According to Reichert et al. (1999), the portrayal of men in advertising in a sexually explicit manner has increased, although women are still more likely to be portrayed in this way. Furthermore, Mager and Helgeson (2011) note that the use of utilitarian touch by men has diminished, and men have become more objectified in advertising images. In fact, it seems that the manner of portrayal of men has started to increasingly resemble that of women. The findings of Säkjärvi (2013) support this argument – She found that the ideal man, as depicted in advertising, now has more feminine characteristics not only in appearance, but in behavior as well.

Weeden and Sabini (2005) describe the body ideal for men as consisting of low fat rate combined with high level of muscularity. In addition, Ricciardelli and Clow (2010) found in their content analysis of eight different lifestyle magazines aimed at men that in general, the represented male bodies were lean and well-toned. In other words, physical fitness is a characteristic that is heavily emphasized for men, which, when contrasted with the thin ideal that is highlighted for women, illustrates how much these two ideals differ from each other. However, Ricciardelli and Clow (2010) note that in some of the metrosexual magazines they examined, the male models were relatively thin. This might indicate that muscularity is no longer an essential characteristic for male models.

In addition, a more recent trend is the idea that men should increasingly engage in grooming (Ricciardelli & Clow, 2010). Ricciardelli and Clow (2010: 65) cite Carrigan et al. (1985) when proposing that this phenomenon provides men an alternative way to express themselves. This could suggest that instead of concentrating on the form of their bodies and aiming to be physically fit, men could focus on enhancing their appearance in other ways.

However, the ideal male body is presented differently in different contexts. Frederick et al. (2005) found that the ideal male body is depicted as more muscular in magazines targeted at men than in magazines targeted at women. This finding may suggest that there are differences in the perceptions of the ideal male body between men and women.

To sum up, Pope et al. (1999) cited in Agliata & Tantleff-Dunn (2004: 8) note that the body ideal for men has become more unrealistic over the years. Thus, the development does not seem to be very favorable.

2.4. Self-Esteem

2.4.1. Definition of Self-Esteem

Coopersmith (1990) cited in Aydinoğlu and Cian (2014: 508) defines self-esteem as “an individual’s self-evaluation (approval or disapproval) and the extent to which the person believes himself worthwhile.” Thus, self-esteem reflects the thoughts and feelings one has about the self. Marsh (1993) contrasts in his research the concepts of global and domain-specific self-esteem which give different explanations of the composition of self-esteem. Zuckerman et al. (2016: 34) cite Harter (1993) when defining global self-esteem as the positivity of the global view of the self. On the other hand, domain-specific self-esteem means that the level of self-esteem of an individual varies across different areas of self (Marsh, 1993). Thus, the concept of global self-esteem implies that self-esteem is one coherent entity, whereas the concept of domain-specific self-esteem indicates that one’s self-esteem consists of many different levels of self-esteem in different domains of the self.

There is some debate over whether self-esteem is an unchanging characteristic or not. Crouch and Degelman (1998: 585) cite Epstein (1980) and Neisser (1988) when suggesting that one's self-concept does not change after late adolescence. What is more, Richins (1991) states that an individual's self-esteem remains relatively unchanged after coming to college age. The concept of global self-esteem conveys the same idea – an individual's self-esteem level is somewhat stable throughout the lifespan (Crandall, 1973, cited in Aydinoglu & Cian, 2014: 508). However, Groesz et al. (2002) found that the negative effects of exposure to idealized model images were stronger for participants who were under 19 years old, which might suggest that self-esteem does evolve with age. Furthermore, it has been studied that female pre-adolescents and adolescents experience a much sharper decline in self-esteem compared with their male counterparts (Harter, 1993, cited in Martin & Gentry, 1997: 19), which also suggests that self-esteem is not a constant attribute.

2.4.2. Gender Differences in Self-Esteem

Zuckerman et al. (2016) conducted a meta-analysis concerning the differences between males and females with regard to the level of global self-esteem. The findings of the authors suggest that, in general, men tend to have higher global self-esteem than women, although the difference is only small (Zuckerman et al., 2016). Zuckerman et al. (2016) attribute the more favorable situation of men to the differing roles of the two genders in the society and the stereotypes that are associated with them. The stereotypic role of women, which can be described as warm and cooperative, is not as favored in the society as the stereotypic role of men, which is often defined as confident and independent (Zuckerman et al., 2016).

On the other hand, Gentile et al. (2009) researched differences between the genders regarding domain-specific self-esteem. The authors found that in the domains of behavioral conduct and moral-ethical self-esteem, women scored higher than men. To the contrary, in the domains of personal self, physical appearance, self-satisfaction and athletic self-esteem, men were found to have a higher level of self-esteem than women. Thus, it seems that these results favor men, too. Furthermore,

Rentzsch et al. (2016) propose that women have lower self-esteem also in the domains of social and academic self-esteem.

2.4.3. Body Image as Contributor to Self-Esteem

Body image is an important component of self-esteem. McCabe and Ricciardelli (2004) suggest that different kinds of disturbances related to body image, such as cognitive and affective disturbances, are quite common among both women and men. According to Agliata and Tantleff-Dunn (2004), these disturbances may lead to lower self-esteem and different problems related to mental health. Furthermore, Martin and Gentry (1997) and Zuckerman et al. (2016) support this point of view. Thus, body image needs to be considered as a crucial factor contributing to the mental health of an individual.

It appears that the effects of exposure to advertising models on the body image of women has been researched more than the effects on males' body image (Agliata & Tantleff-Dunn, 2004). This might be due to the finding that in addition to higher self-esteem, men also have generally a more positive body image compared to women (Franzoi, 1995). This can be attributed to men holding more neutral attitudes towards different parts of their body as opposed to women (Franzoi, 1995).

As stated, it seems that females are more concerned about their bodies than males (Stephens et al., 1994; Sabiston & Chandler, 2010). For example, Stephens et al. (1994) argue that of the two genders, women are more afraid of being overweight. Zuckerman et al. (2016) propose that this is due to the stronger pressure on women's appearance that the surrounding culture feeds. However, Mishkind et al. (1986) discovered that as much as 95 % of college-aged males who were surveyed experienced dissatisfaction with some part of their bodies. Thus, perhaps women and men do not differ in their perceptions of their bodies as much as is often assumed.

2.5. Different Kinds of Comparison Processes

After examining gender depiction in advertising and the concepts of self-esteem and body image, the comparison process that takes place when an individual is exposed to a model in an advertising image is discussed. Mussweiler (2003) suggests that “[h]uman judgment is comparative in nature” (Mussweiler, 2003: 472). In other words, people tend to compare their performance in relation to a certain context or a standard. These comparisons are an important way to get knowledge about oneself (Wood, 1989).

There are said to be gender differences regarding the most influential comparison targets. According to Heinberg and Thompson (1992), cited in Agliata and Tantleff-Dunn (2004: 9), for men, comparisons with celebrities are more influential than for women, on whom comparisons with peers have the strongest impact. Thus, this finding might suggest that men could be more affected by comparison with advertising images, particularly ones with a celebrity endorser.

2.5.1. The Social Comparison Theory

Festinger (1954) developed a theory of social comparison, which, although developed over half a century ago, still seems to be relevant. Festinger (1954: 117) states the basic argument of social comparison theory as follows: “There exists, in the human organism, a drive to evaluate his opinions and beliefs.” Thus, people are naturally motivated to compare themselves to other human beings. The theory is also applicable to the context of comparison to advertising models (Richins, 1991).

The social comparison theory proposes that the more similar the target of comparison is to the individual in question, the more likely it is for a comparison to take place (Festinger, 1954). This is exactly what Sabiston and Chandler (2010) found in their study – Consumers were not as likely to compare themselves to an advertising model when they perceived the model to be divergent from themselves. In addition, Keh et al. (2016) found that the ethnic background of the model had an

impact on the responses of consumers – if the model represented the same ethnic group as the consumer, the level of self-referencing to the model was greater.

Wood (1989) made some adjustments to the original theory by Festinger (1954). Wood suggested that contrary to previous research, an individual often strives towards some goal when making social comparisons. Thus, social comparisons are not necessarily coincidental, but they may be made intentionally to, for example, boost one's self-esteem (Martin & Gentry, 1997). However, Wood (1989) also noted that unintended comparisons may sometimes be imposed by the social environment.

2.5.2. Other Theories

Mussweiler's (2003) selective accessibility model (SAM) is very close to Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory. According to the selective accessibility model, first, a standard of comparison is selected. Depending on whether similarities with the standard are found or not, the outcome may be either standard-consistent information about the self, such as thoughts that one can become even more similar to the standard, or alternatively standard-inconsistent information about the self, for example thoughts that one is so different from the standard that it is impossible to become similar to it (Mussweiler, 2003; Keh et al., 2016).

Another theory that explains how the comparison process occurs is self-discrepancy theory. Higgins (1987) proposes that there are three domains of the self: the actual self, the ideal self, and the ought self. According to the self-discrepancy theory, a comparison between the actual and the ideal self may lead to a discrepancy between these two domains of self, which, in turn, tends to result in negative affect such as dissatisfaction (Higgins, 1987). Sabiston and Chandler (2010: 165) cite Cash and Pruzinsky (1990, 2002) when arguing that media often contributes to creation of these discrepancies by promoting different kinds of ideals.

2.6. Factors Altering the Outcome of the Comparison

As comparison between an individual and a comparison target occurs, there are many factors that influence the outcome of the comparison and the coping strategy employed. For example, Sobol and Darke (2014) suggest that negative coping might be more common to some groups who are seen as particularly vulnerable, such as students. Other possible factors are discussed next.

2.6.1. Gender

Peck and Loken (2004) suggest that females are more conditioned by the culture to engage in self-reflection. This might indicate that females also engage more in social comparisons and thus, comparisons with models in advertising images. What is more, Keh et al. (2016) found that exposure to physically fit peers increased satisfaction with one's appearance in males, whereas females experienced decrease in appearance satisfaction. In other words, according to Keh et al., men are more inclined to produce positive interpretations of social comparisons.

2.6.2. Initial Level of Self-Esteem

The initial level of self-esteem of an individual also influences significantly the nature of the comparison that occurs (Martin & Kennedy, 1993; Aydinoğlu & Cian, 2014). Aydinoğlu and Cian (2014) extend this further; the level of domain-specific self-esteem influences the reaction to an advertisement linked with that domain. For example, the level of appearance self-esteem influences the interpretation of an advertisement related to beauty.

Furthermore, Posavac et al. (1998) cited in Groesz et al. (2002: 3) found that participants who were satisfied with their body rated themselves as thinner after exposure to an advertising image featuring a thin model, compared with those who were less confident with their body. Stephens et al. (1994) also note that females who are dissatisfied with their bodies may be particularly susceptible to negative outcomes deriving from exposure to thin-ideal images. Thus, it seems that high level

of self-esteem may result in more favorable comparisons, protecting the self from the negative effects on mental health, such as anxiety (Jonas et al., 2003).

2.6.3. Motive of Comparison

In addition, the motive of comparison has a significant impact on the resulting effects on self-esteem. Martin and Gentry (1997) note that when an individual is exposed to an image of an advertising model, the comparison that takes place is usually upward. However, this is not always the case. There are three different types of motives related to social comparison: self-evaluation, self-improvement, and self-enhancement (Wood, 1989; Martin & Gentry, 1997).

In the case of comparison with advertising models, if the motive is self-evaluation, that is, a person wants to evaluate his or her worth with regard to some attribute, such as appearance, it is probable that the comparison occurring is an upward one, and the outcome is lowered self-esteem (Martin & Gentry, 1997). Upward comparison is also likely to occur in the case of self-improvement. However, contrary to the case of self-evaluation, these kinds of comparisons may lead to higher levels of self-esteem (Martin & Gentry, 1997). This is because an advertising model, for example, may serve as a source of inspiration, and thus enhance one's self-esteem (Brickman & Bulman, 1977, cited in Wood, 1989: 239). Finally, if the motive is self-enhancement, one attempts to enhance or protect one's self-esteem, and therefore, in this case, downward comparison is the most likely alternative (Wood, 1989). According to Martin and Gentry (1997), these kinds of comparisons tend to have no effect on the self-esteem of an individual.

2.6.4. Attractiveness of the Model

It has been agreed by numerous researchers that the level of attractiveness of the model used as a comparison target influences the comparison process (Crouch & Degelman, 1998; Groesz et al., 2002; Smeesters & Mandel, 2006). Firstly, extremely thin models are argued to cause the most negative effects on the body image of

consumers (Groesz et al., 2002). Conversely, Cash et al. (1983) cited in Martin and Gentry (1997: 21) found that self-perception was the most negative for participants who were exposed to moderately attractive models. Thus, there is some controversy about which kind of models cause the most negative effects.

Smeesters and Mandel (2006) argue that models representing a moderately thin body type may even have positive impact on the self-ratings of consumers. The findings of Peck and Loken (2004) support this view – In fact, in their study, when exposed to an image of a model, the more attractive the model was, the more positive the self-ratings of the participants were.

2.6.5. Other Factors

The more relevant the compared attribute is to the self, the more impact the comparison has on one's self-esteem (Wood, 1989). In other words, when a person is really concerned about his or her appearance, comparing his or her appearance with that of someone else tends to have notable impact on the person's self-esteem. Ashikali and Dittmar (2012) propose that exposure to materialistic advertisements increases the importance of appearance to the self.

Various scholars have found that individuals who are vulnerable to activation of a schema related to physical appearance are more likely to be negatively affected by images of thin models (Lavin & Cash, 2001; Groesz et al., 2002). Markus (1977: 63) defines self-schemata as follows:

Self-schemata are cognitive generalizations about the self, derived from past experience, that organize and guide the processing of the self-related information contained in an individual's social experience.

Thus, self-schemata determine which information is selected to be processed, and how it is processed.

Furthermore, Wan et al. (2013) argue that the mode of exposure, i. e. the level of attention paid to the target affects the outcome of the comparison. If exposure to the target is conscious, for example if one intentionally examines an image of an attractive model, defensive coping strategies are activated in order to protect one's self-image, and thus the outcome is a more positive view of the self. On the contrary, if the exposure is only subtle, the result is a more negative view of the self (Wan et al., 2013).

2.7. Coping Strategies

When a comparison with an attractive model, for instance, has occurred, different kinds of coping strategies can be activated to process the information derived from the comparison. Dimofte et al. (2015: 428) cite White and Argo (2009) when suggesting that “[p]eople tend to reframe threats to their identity in ways that yield positive self-evaluations.” If the comparison resulted in a threat to one's self-esteem, one can for example try to alter the importance of the compared attribute to the self or reduce the similarity or closeness with the comparison target (Tesser, 2000).

2.7.1. Positive Coping

Mills et al. (2002: 1688) cite Collins (1996) in noting that extremely attractive models may inspire consumers rather than lower their self-perception, as is the case when the motive behind the comparison is self-improvement. For example, Myers and Biocca (1992), cited in Agliata and Tantleff-Dunn (2004: 10), found that watching appearance-related content on TV enhanced the body perceptions of women. Thus, although the negative effects are often highlighted, positive coping may occur in many cases.

Sobol and Darke (2014) found that exposure to ideal models did not result in negative coping strategies, but rather yielded self-discrepancies that motivated consumers to enhance their decision-making by “making more optimal choices from well-specified consideration sets” and “better self-regulating indulgent choices”

(Sobol & Darke, 2014: 533). Thus, consumers became motivated to put more effort on other domains than that of physical attractiveness. Tesser (2000) notes, however, that improving the threatened domain of self is a more effective way to protect one's self-esteem than improving some other domain.

2.7.2. Negative Coping

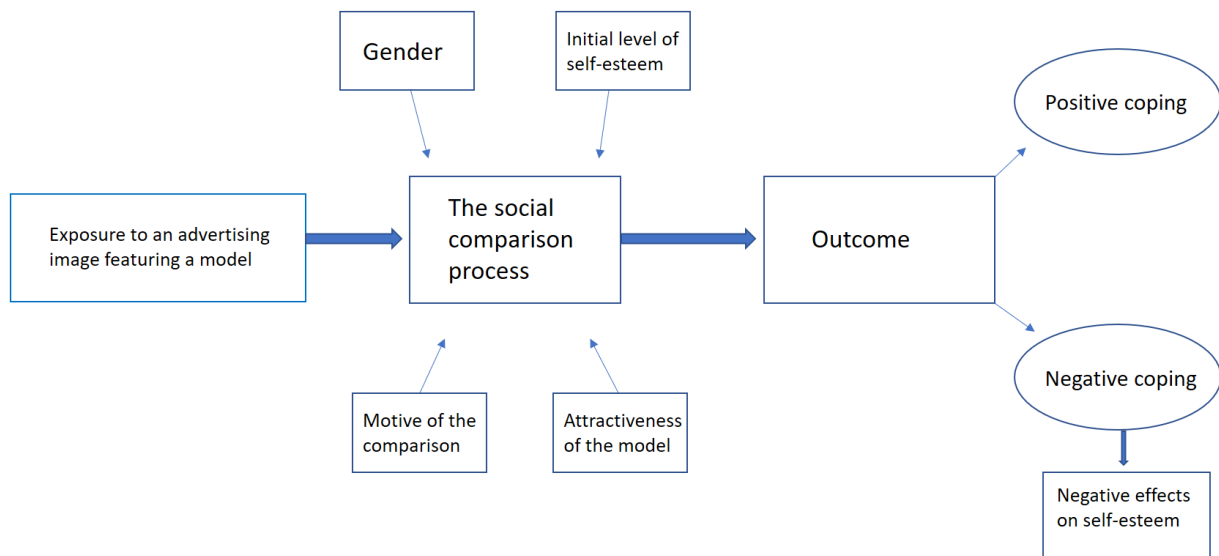
Although positive coping is possible in many cases, it seems that often the negative effects of exposure to advertising models are emphasized. The psychological impacts of negative coping are extensive. Impacts that are highlighted by many scholars are dissatisfaction with one's body and appearance, lower self-esteem, depression, and even eating disorders (Richins, 1991; Agliata & Tantleff-Dunn, 2004; Peck and Loken, 2004; Sobol & Darke, 2014). In addition, Stice and Shaw (1994) identify guilt, shame, stress, and insecurity as some of the negative psychological effects. There may also be some behavioral effects, such as binge eating (Stice & Shaw, 1994) and excessive exercising (Barlett et al., 2008).

The negative coping strategies may vary between the genders. For example, Lavine et al. (1999) made an interesting finding in their study. Males who were exposed to sexist advertisements rated their own body as thinner, whereas females who were exposed to sexist advertisements rated their own bodies as larger. This is perhaps due to the different body ideals for males and females – Men are expected to be extremely muscular (Weeden and Sabini, 2005), and women are expected to be extremely thin (Fouts & Burggraf, 2000).

However, more research is needed to distinguish between how the negative coping strategies vary between the genders.

2.8. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework summarizes the comparison process, indicating different factors that influence the process and the possible outcomes of the comparison.



2.9. Conclusion

The effects of the appearance and body type of advertising models on the self-ratings of consumers is a widely researched topic. However, most of the research related to the phenomenon focuses on describing how males and females are portrayed in advertising, and the effects of these portrayals on females. Alternatively, some studies address the effects in general, not taking gender differences into account. There is little research highlighting the effects on males, and even less research comparing the two genders in relation to the effects.

Generally, it is argued that both genders are depicted in advertising in a stereotypical way, at least to some extent. As individuals have a natural tendency to compare themselves with others, also advertising images of these stereotypically portrayed

models may be chosen as comparison targets. Although the comparison may lead to positive coping which may even increase the level of one's self-esteem, in the literature, negative coping strategies are often emphasized over the positive ones. Negative coping tends to result in various unfavorable outcomes for the individual, such as lower self-esteem, eating disorders, depression, and other psychological problems, which highlights the importance of the phenomenon as a research topic.

3. METHODOLOGY

Both primary and secondary research were used in the construction of this Bachelor's thesis. The next section will elaborate on these methods of data collection.

3.1. Secondary Research

In order to gather background information for this thesis, secondary research was utilized. More specifically, the literature review was constructed on the basis of previous literature on the subject. Most of the secondary sources used for the literature review were journal articles. Based on analysis of previous literature, a conceptual framework was developed. This facilitated primary research design and helped to gain understanding of the different facets of the topic.

3.2. Primary Research

After developing knowledge on the topic by constructing the literature review, primary data collection was planned and implemented. As the aim for this Bachelor's thesis is to explore ways in which the appearance and body type of models used in advertising images affect the self-esteem of young adult consumers, qualitative approach was found to be the best method for collecting primary data for this thesis, as qualitative approach enables the researcher to "understand consumer motivations and illuminate creative concepts" (Sayre, 2001: 2).

More specifically, the primary data was collected by conducting two focus groups. As this study aims at comparing males and females with regard to the effects of the appearance and body type of advertising models on the self-esteem of young adult consumers, one focus group had only female participants and the other had only male participants.

3.2.1. Primary Data Collection

Each of the focus groups had six participants. The participants were recruited by posting an announcement asking for volunteers on the Facebook group of the Aalto University School of Business, Mikkeli Campus students. Some participants were also contacted via direct message on Facebook or WhatsApp and asked to participate. As this study researches young adult consumers, the precondition for the participants was that they would be aged between 19 and 25.

The focus groups were semi-structured. The main questions for the focus groups were designed on the basis of the three research questions. Thus, the structure was the same for both focus groups. However, in addition to the questions designed prior to the focus group sessions, in both sessions, follow-up questions were asked in order to get clarification or more detailed answers.

To generate discussion in the focus groups, each of the groups were shown two advertising images. One image represented a highly idealized image of an advertising model, whereas the other represented a model with more average appearance.

The two focus groups were conducted on subsequent days. At the beginning of each of the sessions, the participants were asked to fill out a form for information on their age, class and nationality. The idea of the focus group discussion was explained to the participants. In addition, basic guidelines for the discussion were reviewed with the participants, and they were asked to give as specific and detailed answers as possible. The participants were also informed about recording the discussion.

However, the participants were not told the specific aim of the study so that their answers would be as unbiased as possible.

3.2.1.1. Focus Group 1: Females

The focus group which was conducted first was the group of females. There were six participants, five Finns and one Bulgarian. The age range of the participants was from 19 to 21. The discussion lasted for approximately one hour. When the recording was transcribed into written format, it resulted in nineteen pages of text.

Participant	Age	Class	Nationality
Female 1	20	2 nd year	Finnish
Female 2	21	2 nd year	Finnish
Female 3	20	2 nd year	Bulgarian
Female 4	20	2 nd year	Finnish
Female 5	20	2 nd year	Finnish
Female 6	19	1 st year	Finnish

Table 1. Demographics of the Focus Group 1: Females

3.2.1.2. Focus Group 2: Males

The second focus group consisted of six males, five Finns and one Irishman. The participants were aged between 20 and 22 years. The discussion lasted for approximately half an hour, and when the recording was transcribed into written format, it resulted in ten pages of text.

Participant	Age	Class	Nationality
Male 1	22	2 nd year / Open university	Finnish
Male 2	20	3 rd year	Irish
Male 3	21	2 nd year	Finnish
Male 4	21	2 nd year	Finnish
Male 5	22	1 st year	Finnish
Male 6	21	1 st year	Finnish

Table 2. Demographics of the Focus Group 2: Males

3.3. Data Analysis

After transcribing the recordings of the focus group discussions into text, the discussions were analyzed by coding the data. The comments of the participants were assigned one or more codes according to the content of the comment. The transcriptions were gone through this way several times.

The next step in the analysis process was to classify the comments of the participants by theme. Various theme headings were created, under which the relevant comments from both focus group discussions were placed. Finally, relevant topics to be discussed in the findings section were selected.

4. FINDINGS

In this section, the findings made based on the analysis on the focus group discussions are addressed. The responses of the male and female groups are compared by theme.

4.1. Desirable Physical Characteristics

At the beginning of the focus group discussions, the participants were asked about physical characteristics that they see as desirable for their own gender. Regarding a desirable body type, many female participants named a curvaceous body as their ideal. In addition, the importance of looking fit was emphasized. However, the participants felt that the most important thing is that one is healthy:

“Whether you’re really skinny or sporty or curvy, or you’re whatever, if you feel healthy, I think you look healthy and I think that’s the most important.” – Female 5

The male respondents brought up similar themes. Looking fit and athletic was valued, in addition to which the importance of being healthy was emphasized.

Furthermore, both groups thought that it is important that it can be seen from one’s appearance that one takes care of oneself.

In addition, femininity was seen as a desirable attribute in one’s appearance by the female participants. For example, long hair and big lips were named as favorable characteristics. On the contrary, for example large feet and being too tall were seen as undesirable attributes. In addition, having too much make-up was not valued by the female participants, but a relatively natural look was preferred. The male participants, on the other hand, brought up characteristics that can be perceived as traditionally masculine, such as being tall.

Participants in both focus groups thought that being average is a good thing:

“Something in the middle for everything is perfect.” – Female 3

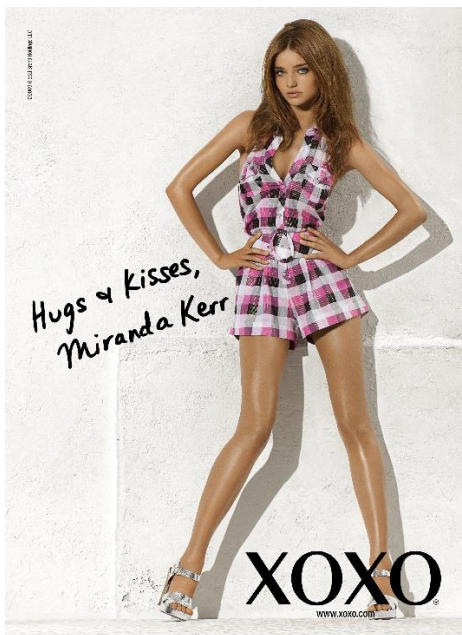
“Not be at the end of the spectrum, way too tall or way too short.” – Male 3

What is more, being proportionate was valued by both groups:

“If I would be really skinny, like model skinny, I wouldn’t want to be as short as I am right now.” – Female 2

“It’s not really a good look if someone’s really tall but really skinny.” – Male 2

4.2. Attitudes towards the Images of the Idealized Models



Images 1 & 2. Images of the idealized models

The advertisement with an idealized model that was shown for the female participants was an advertisement of XOXO, an American clothing brand targeted to young adult females, featuring an Australian top model Miranda Kerr. The initial reaction of many of the female participants to the picture was that the model does not have many desirable characteristics. However, pretty face, thin waist and nice hair were named as favorable attributes of the model.

Many of the female participants thought that the idealized model’s legs were unnaturally long. One participant commented:

*“I think if she was shorter, she wouldn’t look as unnatural being that long and skinny.”
– Female 2*

In addition, according to the female participants, mean expression and arrogant posture made the model appear as unattractive:

“It doesn’t evoke my interest, because it looks like she doesn’t care.” – Female 5

Many of the participants named the expression of the model as the reason why the picture did not evoke any feelings in them. Alternatively, the expression evoked negative feelings:

“It makes me kind of negative, because her face is very negative. I can feel it as well. The face makes me more negative or more angry than I was before.” – Female 1

The advertisement with an idealized model that was shown for the male focus group was an advertisement of Guess, an American lifestyle brand. In contrast to the group of females, the male respondents found several desirable characteristics from the appearance of the idealized model.

The first thing that the male participants paid attention to was the fitness and athletic look of the model. Especially the muscular arms and desirable proportions of the model’s body were paid attention to.

In addition, the male participants perceived the model as very confident. Particularly, the posing of the model contributed to this kind of perception:

“In this photo, having this kind of posing is like to show his qualities, to bring out the best.” – Male 2

However, it was also noted by some male participants that the image was rather stereotypical and over-dramatized:

“To me, it’s kind of fun because it’s so stereotypical male model picture, like with the gaze, the eyes, and the whole posture, and the buttons are going almost all the way down. It’s kind of humorous because it’s so stereotypical.” – Male 3

What is more, the images of the idealized models were regarded as to some extent sexualized by both groups. However, the female participants did not pay attention to the sexualized portrayal of the idealized model until they had seen the image of the model with more average appearance.

“When you look at this picture [the picture of the average model], you can definitely see the difference, but when I looked at the first picture [the picture of the idealized model], I didn’t think that it was like pure sex right here.” – Female 5

When asked about which characteristics of the model are seen as realistic, many of the female participants pointed out that the idealized model looked like a doll to them, and that some parts of her body, such as the waist, could have been photoshopped.

However, it was also noted that there are people who actually look like the idealized model. The participants thought that by having the right genes, some luck, and commitment to exercise, it would be possible to look like the model. It is worth noting, however, that many of the female participants thought that it is possible for some people to achieve the appearance of the model, but not for themselves.

In contrast, regarding the realistic characteristics of the idealized male model, the male participants thought that the picture was rather realistic apart from the smooth skin, which might have been modified by computer. The physical attributes of the model were seen as achievable, if one does enough exercise and takes care of one’s skin, for example.

Nevertheless, the images of the idealized models were seen as rather normal advertising images by both focus groups:

“I still think it’s kind of the normal way to advertise, like having really skinny, really long legs and... I don’t know, not that natural look. I think that’s more normal in an everyday life. For example, when you walk the street and look at the windows of different shops. So, I think that’s why at first, I thought that the first picture [picture of the idealized model] was more normal.” – Female 5

4.3. Attitudes towards the Ordinary-Looking Models



Images 3 & 4. Images of the models with average appearances

After the image of the idealized model, the participants were shown an advertising image of a rather ordinary-looking model who was not a professional model. The advertisement shown to the female participants was a bar soap advertisement by Dove, a global beauty brand. The participants found more desirable characteristics from this picture than from the idealized one. In fact, many of the characteristics that were named desirable for women in general at the beginning of the discussion were found from this picture.

The natural and healthy look of the model was emphasized as a positive characteristic by the female group. As stated by one female participant:

“She looks more like a regular woman who really takes care of herself.” – Female 2

Particularly, the glowing and healthy-looking skin of the model attracted the attention of the participants. It was also named as a positive thing that the model had little make-up; the natural look of the model was seen as relatable to women as a day-to-day-look. In addition, it was noted that having little make-up made the model look easily approachable.

With regard to the body type of the model, the participants gave following comments:

“She’s skinny, but I think that’s just a healthy skinny, not too skinny or in any way unnatural.” – Female 5

“There’s not the hourglass figure that we have been discussing about, but then again, she just looks good like that.” – Female 6

The only negative thing that was said about the picture was that the smile of the model looked rather forced. The participants also found some unrealistic attributes from the picture. The teeth of the model were commented to be unnaturally white, and the skin was regarded as blurred, as there were no wrinkles or for example arm hair visible. It was also noted that the picture is probably seen as more unrealistic by older consumers:

“The older you get, the harder it is to attain this kind of body.” – Female 1

Overall, the model evoked mostly positive feelings in the participants, or alternatively, no feelings at all. The happy expression of the model was seen to make her easily approachable. In addition, some participants perceived the model to resemble their own mother, which made them feel trust towards the picture. One participant summarized her feelings towards the model as follows:

“She’s pretty to me, because she manages to be pretty without all that extra stuff on her.” – Female 2

The second picture that was shown to the male participants was an advertising image of Jack and Jones, a clothing brand aimed for young men. In contrast to the

female group, less desirable characteristics were found from the image of the ordinary-looking model by the male respondents. Many respondents noted right after seeing the picture that the model looked skinnier and less athletic than the model in the previous picture. The model was described to resemble an ordinary Finnish guy picked from the street rather than a model. One male respondent commented:

“We could say that he looks fine and everything, but there’s nothing really striking about him.” – Male 2

Most of the male participants thought that the hunched posture of the model made him appear insecure. It was also pointed out that the model does not promote himself well enough:

“I wouldn’t say it’s as effective [as an advertisement], because it doesn’t convince you that you want to be this person.” – Male 2

To the contrary, it was also noted that the posture of the model only made him appear less artificial:

“For normal models, they usually have some very sexualized pose or something. This is like, someone could just be sitting on a couch like that. He’s not pretending to be anything else than he is.” – Male 4

Thus, the male participants found the image of the ordinary-looking model more realistic than the image of the idealized model. However, as an advertisement, it was not regarded as effective, because the model was not perceived to promote himself well enough.

On the whole, regarding the attitudes of the participants towards the models, it seems that female participants preferred the image of the more ordinary-looking model, whereas male participants had more favorable attitude towards the idealized model.

4.4. Explored Effects on the Self-Esteem of the Participants

None of the models seemed to have much effect on the self-esteem of the participants. For the group of females, the most important reason for this was that neither of the models were perceived to be relatable enough to the participants. For the group of males, on the other hand, it seemed that the participants were so critical towards the images that there were no negative effects on the self-esteem of the participants. In fact, some male respondents saw the image of the idealized model as motivational rather than self-threatening. In addition, both groups agreed that they are so used to seeing advertising images that they do not evoke any particular feelings in them.

As stated, the female group found both models rather distant from themselves. When asked about the feelings evoked by the idealized model, one female participant commented:

“It doesn’t make me jealous or wishful or anything because it’s hard to relate it to my life. So, that is why it doesn’t really evoke any feelings.” – Female 2

In addition, the target group of the advertisement with the idealized model was thought to be slightly younger consumers than what the participants were themselves, which could be one reason why the participants were not able to relate to the model. Some comments might also suggest that the model was seen as unattainable, because she was perceived to belong to a different social group than the participants:

“Oh, those girls... All the rich kids that are so spoiled and so insecure that they do everything but be themselves.” – Female 3

Regarding the second picture, the model was often during the discussion said to remind the participants of their mothers. This might suggest that the model was not relatable enough for the participants to evoke any feelings or have effect on their self-esteem.

However, the lack of relatability to the models might not be the only reason why no effects on the self-esteem of the female participants were found. In fact, according to comments of the participants, there could be effects if the way of portraying women in an idealized way would not be a norm:

“I feel like if we were used to this way [portraying women in a more realistic manner], and if they started to do advertisements with more sexualized, more super skinny, kind of more hard-to-relate-to models, then we would be way less okay with it. And it would strike way more like ‘what, how am I supposed to look like this, it’s stupid that girls have to be made look like this’ but that’s what we’ve always been used to, so...”
– Female 2

In fact, male respondents also named the ubiquity of idealized models as a reason why the images did not cause any reactions in them. The image of the idealized model was seen as a perfectly normal, everyday advertising image. The male respondents were also rather critical towards the images, especially the image of the idealized model. Instead of being a threat to one’s self-esteem, the image of the idealized model was seen as stereotypical, over-dramatized and even funny because of being so exaggerated. Thus, the respondents did not take the picture very seriously.

It was, however, acknowledged, that the image of the idealized model succeeded in making the viewer want to be like the model:

“When I look at those arms, I would like to get a bit more shape.” – Male 4

“These clothes look great, the hair looks great, you want to be this person.” – Male 2

What is more, an interesting finding is that, although it was agreed by many male respondents that the images did not evoke any feelings in them, some male respondents found the image of the idealized model inspiring and motivational:

“For me, personally, if I see a picture like the previous one, where there’s an attractive guy, that’s more like a motivational picture than it would make me feel bad

about myself because I don't possess those attributes. I think for most men, those things are attainable somehow. The skin is doable, having more muscles is doable, and being groomed is doable.” – Male 1

Overall, few effects on the self-esteem of the participants in either group were observed. The attitudes of the participants towards the images were somewhat neutral. Interestingly, the idealized model had even positive effects on the male participants by giving them motivation to improve their own appearance.

5. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

In this section, the findings on the focus groups are discussed in the context of theories from previous literature. After this, recommendations to businesses based on the findings are addressed.

5.1. Depiction of the Genders in Advertising

The findings of this study support what has been argued in literature about the portrayal of males and females in advertising. It has been argued by many scholars (Fouts & Burggraf, 2000; Weeden & Sabini, 2005) that in advertising, thinness is often emphasized as an ideal body type for women. Many of the female participants argued the same:

“I still think it's kind of the normal way to advertise, like having really skinny, really long legs and kind of... I don't know, not that natural look.” – Female 5

However, thinness was not brought up at all in the female focus group as a desirable physical characteristic. Instead, a curvaceous body was named by almost all the female participants as the body type that they would like to achieve. This finding is in line with the suggestion of Overstreet et al. (2010), who argue an emerging trend to be that more and more women now strive to achieve a curvaceous body instead of only wanting to be thin.

On the other hand, the male participants agreed that a fit and athletic look is a desirable characteristic in one's appearance. This is consistent with the findings of Ricciardelli and Clow (2010), who argue in their content analysis that in media, physical fitness is heavily stressed as a desirable characteristic for men. What is more, Ricciardelli and Clow (2010) propose that grooming is increasingly suggested to be an important activity for men. The findings of this study suggest that grooming, indeed, is valued by men, which might imply that the physical and behavioral ideals fostered by the media do have impact on the perceptions of consumers about acceptable appearance.

5.2. Self-Esteem and Body Image

According to Gentile et al. (2009), men generally have higher levels of domain-specific self-esteem in the domains of physical appearance and self-satisfaction. In addition, Franzoi (1995) argued that men have, in general, more positive body image than women due to men holding more neutral attitudes towards different parts of their body. The findings of this study might support this argument. During the focus group discussion, women brought up more physical attributes that they felt they lacked, or parts of their body that they felt insecure about. For example, when asked about desirable physical characteristics for women, one female respondent commented:

"To me, it looks better when you have a smaller upper body and then you have like larger thighs or something. Which is what I don't have right now. Because I have super wide back." – Female 1

In contrast, in the male focus group, there were few comments like this. It might be, however, that there was little discussion on insecurities in the male group, because the male respondents did not feel as comfortable sharing their insecurities as the female respondents.

5.3. Reasons for Uncovering Few Effects

Contrary to findings of several scholars, in this study, little effect of advertising models on the self-esteem of consumers was found. This might be due to many reasons.

The social comparison theory developed by Festinger (1954) proposes that the more similar the target of comparison is to the individual in question, the more likely it is for a comparison to take place. In the context of the topic of this thesis, consumers are not as likely to compare themselves to a model when they perceive the model to be divergent from themselves. This might explain particularly why there were little effects on the female group. The idealized model was perceived by the participants to be targeted to a slightly younger consumer segment than the participants. In addition, some participants perceived the model to belong to a different social group than the participants. With regard to the model with more average appearance, the respondents contrasted the model with their mother rather than with themselves. Thus, both models were seen as somewhat distant and unrelatable to the female participants. Therefore, images with models who could have been perceived as more similar to the participants should have been chosen to be displayed in the focus groups.

Secondly, Tesser (2000) suggests that when a threat to one's self-esteem is detected, one can reduce the similarity or closeness with the comparison target in order to protect one's self-esteem. This theory could also explain the findings of this study. It might be that no significant effects on the self-esteem of the participants were explored, because the participants subconsciously reduced the similarity with the advertising models in order to protect their self-esteem.

What is more, the motive of comparison might also explain the findings on the focus groups. According to Wood (1989), there are three types of motives to social comparison: self-evaluation, self-improvement and self-enhancement. In case the motive is self-enhancement, one attempts to enhance or protect one's self-esteem, and thus the comparison usually has no effect on the self-esteem of the individual.

The last possible explanation for the findings is the mode of exposure. Wan et al. (2013) argue that if exposure to the target of comparison is conscious, meaning that one intentionally examines the target of comparison, in this case the image of the advertising model, defensive coping strategies are likely to be activated in order to protect one's self-esteem.

5.4. Reasons for the Motivational Effects on Males

An interesting finding made on the group of males was that the image of the idealized model seemed to be perceived by some participants as motivational rather than a threat to one's self-esteem, suggesting that the image could have had even positive impact on the self-esteem of the participants. In fact, previous literature seems to support this finding. Keh et al. (2016) found that as opposed to women, men are more likely to produce positive interpretations of social comparisons. This might explain why there was no such effect on the group of females.

What is more, Collins (1996) cited in Mills et al. (2002: 1688) proposes that extremely attractive models may inspire consumers rather than affect negatively their self-perception. In addition, Wood's (1989) theory of the motive of comparison gives support to this finding - In case the motive of comparison is self-improvement, the comparison target is seen as a source of inspiration, and as a result, one's self-esteem is enhanced.

5.5. Recommendations to Businesses

Next, recommendations to businesses on the types of models that should be used in advertising images are discussed. According to the focus group participants, the type of model used in an advertisement does have an impact on their perceptions of the advertised product and thus, their purchase intentions.

5.5.1. Relatability of the Model

According to the respondents, the model should be relatable to the viewer of the advertisement, and more specifically, to the target group of the advertisement.

Participants commented on this as follows:

“When I see somebody who’s more like me, I’m more interested and intrigued about it, whereas if I see something not attainable or realistic to me, I just skip it, because it doesn’t really strike my interest.” – Female 2

“For example, models in some clothing ads... If I straight see that the model is much taller and much thinner than I am, then I probably won’t even try the clothes on, if I’m for example at H&M or something. But if I see that okay the model is a bit shorter, and she has some hips and everything, I’ll be much more interested to try them, because they will probably fit with a bigger probability.” – Female 6

“If they’re selling clothes, for example, in the advertisement, and if the guy is too over the top that I’m not on that level, it doesn’t really sell it to me.” – Male 4

As the comments illustrate, the perceived similarity with the model can even have impact on the purchase intention of a consumer. It was also brought up that the relatability of the model gives credibility to the advertiser; If the viewer can relate to the model in an advertisement, the advertisement communicates to the viewer that he or she can have the same benefit that the advertised product gives to the model. Thus, the attitude of the consumer towards the product becomes more positive.

However, some female respondents pointed out that the similarity of the model to themselves does not have significant impact on the likelihood that they buy a certain product. Even if a clothing model, for example, would seem closer to oneself, one still has to do the effort of trying the clothes on before making a purchase decision.

5.5.2. Attractiveness of the Model

As with some participants of the female focus group, some male respondents did not see the relatability of the model as a crucial factor in making a purchase decision. In fact, they thought that attractiveness of the model is more important:

“In a fashion advertisement, I would like to see an attractive model wearing the same clothes that I would be wearing, so I don’t think there needs to be that much realism.”

– Male 1

Many male participants agreed that a model should be above themselves in terms of appearance so that the model challenges the viewer to achieve the looks. Still, the participants thought that there has to be realism in the sense that the appearance of the model indeed is achievable.

In addition, most of the male respondents thought that in order to attract their attention, it is important that the model looks confident and promotes himself well. The ordinary-looking model was not perceived to be as interesting to the participants, because he appeared insecure and did not show off his qualities, but sat hunched and looked closed. On the contrary, the idealized model with a more open, confident posture gave the participants more “will to shop” (Male 4).

In contrast, female participants did not perceive the attractiveness of the model to have as important a role. However, some female respondents agreed that it is nice if in a clothing advertisement, the model is young and attractive.

What is more, female respondents highlighted the role of the expression of the model in making the model attractive and appealing. For example, regarding the image of the idealized model, the negative expression of the model was perceived to cause negative affect and also influence negatively the attitude towards the brand, whereas the happy expression of the second model made the model appear easily approachable and more appealing to the participants. Thus, companies should also pay attention to the expression of the advertising model.

In sum, it appears to be rather important to males that a model in an advertisement is attractive, and thus challenges the viewer to achieve a similar appearance. In turn, females seem to place more importance on the relatability of the model.

5.5.3. The Type of Product

It is also worth noting that companies should consider the type of product that they are selling when choosing a model for the advertisement. It was suggested by both groups that a model used in an advertisement transmits meanings to the advertised product. For example, one female respondent commented the model in Dove's bar soap advertisement as follows:

"If that woman would have more make-up, it would collide with the product. The product is very natural and everything." – Female 1

One female respondent summarized her views about how the looks of a model communicates attributes of the advertised product to the target group of the advertisement as follows:

"For example, if it was a perfume ad, then there's a strong connection between the model and the perfume, what it actually smells like, and also the target group. So, all of those would be very similar." – Female 1

Thus, businesses should strive to connect the looks of the model chosen to be featured in an advertisement with the product characteristics that are desired to be communicated.

5.6. Limitations

This study has some limitations that may affect the reliability and validity of the results. Firstly, the focus group discussions were recorded, and the quality of the recordings was rather low in some parts. Therefore, it was slightly unclear what the participants were saying in some parts of the discussions, which might have caused faulty interpretations of the participants' comments in the transcription phase.

Secondly, the findings may not offer a comprehensive illustration of the opinions of the participants, because some participants might have felt uncomfortable sharing their thoughts in a group about appearance-related topics that might be deemed as

sensitive. Thus, everyone might not have expressed their true opinion on the topics discussed.

In addition, in this study, some variables that might have affected the outcome of the comparison with the advertising models were not controlled. For example, the initial level of self-esteem of the participants was not measured, although, according to various scholars, the initial level of self-esteem has significant impact on the comparison process occurred.

6. CONCLUSIONS

6.1. Main Findings

The aim of this thesis was to explore effects that the appearance and body type of models used in advertising images have on the self-esteem of young adult males and females. Two focus groups, a group of males and a group of females, were conducted in order to compare the possible effects between the genders.

The findings of this study indicate that neither type of model, a model with idealized appearance or a model with more average appearance, had notable effect on the self-esteem of either gender. Many of the participants thought that idealized, unrealistic models can be seen everywhere these days, and thus, they do not evoke any specific emotions. Lack of relatability to the models was also named by female participants as a crucial factor why the models were perceived to have no impact on their self-ratings. The results conflict with suggestions of scholars who have researched the same issue before, as a majority of them argue that models used in advertising images, especially ones with idealized appearance, usually have negative impact on the self-esteem of consumers.

However, an interesting finding was that the image of the idealized model was found aspirational by some male respondents, which suggests that exposure to the model might have even enhanced the self-esteem of the respondents. Thus, in contrast to arguments of several scholars, it might not only be a negative thing to use very

attractive models in advertisements. This finding provides fresh perspective from which to consider choice of models in advertising.

Based on the findings of this study, recommendations to businesses were offered on what type of models should be used in advertising images for the attitude of consumers towards the advertised product to be as favorable as possible. On the basis of the discussion of the female focus group, it can be suggested that in order to evoke positive feelings towards their advertisement, companies should favor models that are relatable to the viewer. In other words, models who are close to the target group of the advertisement with regard to appearance should be chosen.

Furthermore, based on the discussion of the male focus group, it can be proposed that businesses should choose models who can be inspirational to the viewer, that is, models that are attractive, but not too unrealistic and unattainable.

6.2. Implications for International Business

In today's globalized world, media, including advertising, is present everywhere. Thus, it is becoming impossible for anyone to avoid exposure to a vast amount of advertising images every day. Therefore companies, especially multinationals that can have huge impact as opinion leaders, should take responsibility for the kind of advertising images they publish. It should be ensured that advertising is not done at the expense of consumers, even though the results of this study suggest that neither idealized nor ordinary-looking advertising models have significant negative effects on the self-esteem of consumers. Today, diversity and equality -related issues are increasingly brought forth and discussed. These are subjects that also businesses should take a stance on. By avoiding using only stereotypical thin female models or muscular male models, businesses can contribute to creating a more egalitarian society.

What is more, this study provided managers with suggestions on how to develop their advertising to be more favorable not only from the point of view of consumers, but from the point of view of businesses themselves. Especially large multinational companies can benefit from these suggestions, as they usually have large budgets

for advertising and global advertising campaigns that reach several millions of consumers.

6.3. Suggestions for Further Research

For future research, it can be suggested that the topic could be researched using different methods. For example, by using individual interviews rather than focus groups, more in-depth insights could be made on the feelings that advertising models evoke in consumers. When using focus groups as a method for gathering data, more fruitful findings could be made if the groups were slightly larger and more diverse. In addition, quantitative research could also be an applicable method for researching the topic. For instance, a survey could be conducted before and after exposure to advertising images to measure the level of self-esteem of the participants.

In addition, different age groups could be researched in order to develop understanding about the phenomenon from the point of view of younger or older consumers. For example, younger consumers, such as teenagers, could be an interesting target group for research, as they can be perceived as more vulnerable to influences deriving from advertising than young adult consumers.

6.4. The Thesis Process

The process of completing this Bachelor's Thesis offered insights not only into the topic but also into the different phases of academic research. However, I feel that the most interesting knowledge gained in the process was understanding the extent to which models used in advertising images affect the decision-making processes of consumers. According to the focus group discussions, the appearance of a model affects whether a consumer pays attention to the advertisement in the first place. It can also determine whether a consumer decides to take the advertised product into his or her consideration set or not – If the model is perceived to be too distant from oneself, it might be concluded that the advertised product is not targeted to oneself.

What is more, it was interesting to see how the views of men and women differed from each other. I was particularly eager to find out how the male participants would react to the advertising images, as there is little previous research on the topic regarding men. Although both genders showed criticism towards the models, men had more positive attitudes towards them, which was interesting to observe.

Overall, I feel that this research has taught me a lot about consumer behavior. Researching the phenomenon has given me an insight into the various kinds of psychological effects that advertising can have on consumers.

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8. APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Focus Group Questions

Opening Questions

1. What physical characteristics do you consider desirable for your gender?
2. What physical characteristics do you consider undesirable for your gender?

Picture of the idealized model

3. What physical characteristics of this model do you consider desirable?
4. What physical characteristics of this model do you think are attainable and realistic?
5. What feelings does the model evoke in you?

Picture of the ordinary-looking model

6. What physical characteristics of this model do you consider desirable?

7. What physical characteristics of this model do you think are attainable and realistic?
8. What feelings does the model evoke in you?

Pictures of both models

9. Which one of these advertising images would most likely convince you to buy the product, and what factors influence your choice?